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HER BROTHER'S KEEPER
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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

JUN -7 1924 ✓

HER BROTHER'S KEEPER

IT was a good thing the foundations of Little Croft had been well and truly laid. The hurricane of wind sweeping across the moorland fairly howled round the sturdy, square-built house, tearing at the eaves and shaking the heavy oaken doors as though it sought to uproot it bodily from the solid earth on which it stood, while rain and hail, driven before the gale, rattled against the window panes like miniature gunfire.

"Beastly night!" observed Colin Trenby, leaning forward in his chair to poke up the fire. "Pity any one who's out in it."

A man of six-and-thirty or thereabouts, seated on the other side of the wide, old-fashioned hearth, glanced up indifferently.

"I shouldn't imagine there is any one. The moorland folk have sense enough to go in out of the rain." And his eyes fell again on the pages of the book he was reading.

"Then you're jolly well mistaken!" exclaimed Colin, jumping to his feet. "There is some one out in it. Do you hear that?"

"That" was the hoot of a motor-horn, repeated urgently several times and sounding close at hand, and the next instant, during a momentary respite from the uproar of the wind, came a hurried tapping at the window. In a couple of strides Colin had reached the door and was out in the square hall into which it opened, and a minute later came

the grating noise of bolts withdrawn and the creak of the heavy outer door as it swung wide, followed by a confused murmur of voices, one of them unmistakably feminine.

"I couldn't make any one hear." The voices drew nearer. "So I told my chauffeur to tootle the horn while I rapped on the window. I was determined to get in *somehow*."

"I should think you were!"

Colin had begun some eager answer, but the man within the room paid no heed to it. He had risen quickly to his feet, startled by a curiously familiar note in that other voice—the rippling, flute-like voice which crossed and mingled with Colin's. A fleeting look of annoyance—almost, it seemed, of apprehension—passed over his face and his eyes went swiftly to the figure which preceded Colin into the room. Sex, feminine—and for the moment that was practically all that was discoverable. A green, fur-edged motor-cap, pulled well down onto the head, and the big fur collar of a similar green leather coat between them almost entirely concealed the newcomer's features, while high Russian boots meeting the flounce of fur which edged the coat completed the costume. A flash of topaz-golden eyes between thick lashes and the tip of a rather impertinent little nose was about all the outward woman visible.

"This is Miss Verity Daryll, of the Cosmopolitan Theater," began Colin eagerly. "Her car's broken down. Miss Daryll, let me introduce my brother Simon."

"I think we've met before." But there was no welcome in the man's grave voice.

Miss Daryll, disregarding it, held out her hand, with a smile.

"Why, of course we have!" she replied. "At the Sacheverels, wasn't it? I hope you don't mind my taking refuge here from the storm?" She spoke airily, but an observant ear might have detected the faintest note of de-

fiance in her tones. Colin, however, was far too enraptured at the moment to be observant.

"He'll be only too charmed, Miss Daryll," he assured her eagerly. "He's rather an old stick-in-the-mud"—with an affectionate glance at his brother—"but he means well."

In spite of a certain family resemblance of tone of voice and gesture, there was a marked contrast between the two Trenbys, and Miss Daryll's glance went curiously from Colin's clean-cut young face, with its gay blue eyes and fair hair with the rebellious kink in it, that no amount of ferocious brushing would subdue, to that of the elder man—lean and rather saturnine, with grave gray eyes and a mouth that closed in a straight, unyielding line.

"You're thinking we're not a bit alike?" said Colin quickly, interpreting her questioning glance. "But, you see, we're only half-brothers—not the real article at all. Though it doesn't make a bit of difference to us, except in the shape of our noses. Does it, old chap?"

Simon Trenby's eyes softened oddly as they rested on the boyish face. It was obvious that this young step-brother of his, fifteen years his junior, meant a good deal to him.

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that it would be rather more useful at this juncture if you helped Miss Daryll out of her motor-coat and ordered tea instead of discussing the fine points of our relationship? Meanwhile," he added, turning to the visitor, "I'll go and see what can be done about your car."

Verity nodded and proceeded, with Colin's assistance, to disembarass herself of her heavy motor-kit, emerging slender and delightful in the latest thing in frocks, riotous with embroideries in apparently every color under the sun and belted with a sash very low down on her hips. Accepting one of Colin's cigarettes, she curled herself up in the chair Simon had vacated and proceeded to expound

with much cheerfulness the series of mishaps which had culminated in her unceremonious onslaught upon the windows of Little Croft.

"I don't know what we should have done if we hadn't happened across your place. We'd lost our way, and the engine was knocking like a steam-hammer, while the floor of the car resembled a pond more than anything else. Does it usually deluge like this in your part of the world?"

"Not often," replied Colin. "This is about the worst storm we've had for the year. All the same," he added audaciously, "I've no complaint to make against this particular tempest."

"Nor have I." Verity smiled back at him enchantingly. "Only I'd like to let the unfortunate friends who were expecting me know that I've found refuge here. They'll be wondering what's happened to me. Of course you've no telephone?"

"Of course we *have*. 'Phone them that you can't get to them till to-morrow."

She hesitated.

"You can't, you know," insisted Colin. "Even if Simon and your chauffeur get the car into working order, you can't possibly turn out again on a night like this. It's perfectly respectable," he added reassuringly. "We've an old gem of a housekeeper who stands for all the proprieties rolled into one."

Verity burst out laughing.

"I don't think that point would have bothered me much. And it's awfully good of you. I'll be thankful to stay if—if your brother doesn't object."

"Simon! Of course he won't. Why, you're quite old friends, aren't you?"

"Hardly that," she submitted. "We both stayed at the same house once for a week-end. And frankly"—with a fleeting smile—"I don't think he particularly liked me."

"Nonsense!" protested Colin stoutly. "He couldn't help liking you. No one could."

"Thanks so much. Well, let's say he disapproved of me, then."

It was some time before Simon returned from investigating the trouble with the car, and when he did it was to discover Colin and Verity consuming unlimited quantities of tea and hot buttered scones and apparently on the very best of terms with each other. A burst of gay young laughter over some ridiculous joke or other synchronized with his entrance. He was suddenly conscious of feeling old—old and tired.

"I've given my housekeeper orders to prepare a room for you, Miss Daryll," he said rather stiffly. "Your car can't be put in running order before to-morrow, and in any case you couldn't possibly face this storm."

Verity glanced up at him from under lids shadowed with faint purple.

"I'm sorry to be such a nuisance," she murmured.

"Not at all." But there was no cordiality in his disclaimer, and Colin, flashing a quick look of protest at his brother, enthusiastically protested his satisfaction over the *contretemps* which had procured them the pleasure of Miss Daryll's company.

At dinner she appeared radiant in another creation of gold and green tissue which she had extracted from her suit case. She had extracted other things, too, to repair the ravages effected by wind and rain, and her strikingly pretty face was made-up to look, if not prettier, at least more striking than Nature had intended. Simon took in at a glance the darkened brows and lashes, the faint mauve shadows that deepened the setting of her eyes, the scarlet lips that were quite frankly and rather adorably the delicately penciled work of a lipstick. A veiled scent emanated from her vicinity—something Eastern and elusive

that made you think of rose-leaves and sandalwood and moonlight gardens and desperately sweet music.

"Do you take mustard?" Almost savagely Simon pushed towards her the little silver mustard-pot that stood with its salt and pepper brethren betwixt his plate and hers.

"Not with soup, thank you," she replied meekly. And Simon, with a muttered ejaculation, hastily substituted the pepper and relapsed into angry silence.

But his silence had apparently no power to damp the enjoyment of the other two. They squabbled happily over the salted almonds, which they both adored, argued heatedly over the latest dancing steps, and discussed everything they could think of from the probable date of the end of the world to the origin of the Blues. And all the time Colin hardly took his eyes off Verity's charming face, and equally she pretended to be totally unaware of the fact.

After dinner she sang to them, playing her own accompaniments, snatches of song from the various musical comedies in which she had appeared. Simon sat listening with bent head and unsmiling mouth, and not even the most provocative of her little songs, sung with that same grace and impertinence which nightly packed the Cosmopolitan Theater from floor to ceiling whenever she was playing there, gave him the least apparent enjoyment. On the contrary, he seemed relieved when the evening came to an end, and jumped up with alacrity to light Miss Daryll's bedroom candle for her. Meanwhile, Colin stood murmuring extravagant boyish compliments in her ear.

"You must come and see me in London," she answered him charmingly. "We open next month—a topping new musical comedy, *The Chrysanthemum*. Don't you"—she glanced round the old, oak-raftered living-room—"don't you ever come to town?" Then, her glance taking in the

essential "rightness" of Colin's evening kit: "You look as if you did."

He nodded.

"We gravitate between Mount Street and this place. At least, I do. Old Simon digs himself in here most of the year round."

"Ah! But how foolish!" She bestowed a brilliant smile on Simon. "How foolish to—to vegetate like that!"

"You think so?" Simon parried the smile bluntly. "I'm afraid I can't agree. I find nothing to attract me in London."

The next morning, amid a burst of sunshine and a flurry of farewells, Miss Daryll departed, smiling above the armful of flowers which Colin had rifled from the greenhouses right under the irate nose of the dour old gardener.

"Colin, I want you a moment." Simon laid a detaining hand on the boy's arm.

"Yes, old man, what is it?" Colin answered abstractedly. His thoughts were really with the big touring car which was carrying Verity Daryll away along the ribbon of road that crossed the moors.

For a moment Simon did not speak, but stood staring down into the fire. Then he said slowly:

"Look here, Colin boy, cut the Cosmopolitan out of your scheme of things. Will you?"

"What do you mean? Why, Miss Daryll has asked me to go and see her there."

"Precisely. Don't go."

Colin was up in arms in a moment. It was absurd, monstrous, behind the times to talk like that. Oh, yes, of course he knew his brother had a down on actresses, but nowadays they were amongst the most charming of women, and welcomed everywhere. Did he wish him—Colin—to become an absolute back number? Etcetera, etcetera."

"I'll ask you one question," said Simon at last. "Do you suppose Miss Daryll would have invited you to come and see her if she hadn't known you were pretty well endowed with this world's goods?"

Colin blustered.

"How could she know? She happened in here quite by accident."

"Quite." Simon's expression was non-committal. "But she'd met me before at the Sacheverels, and you're as well aware as I am that Mrs. Sacheverel knows the amount of our income to the last halfpenny. And what Mrs. Sacheverel knows all her friends and acquaintances know. Take my word for it, Colin, a successful actress like Miss Daryll would have no earthly use for a young man with empty pockets."

But Simon's warning fell on very stony ground. The production of the new musical comedy at the Cosmopolitan Theater found Colin installed in the Mount Street house, and it was very soon known to all those whom it concerned, and to a good many whom it did not concern at all, that in the evenings young Trenby was generally to be found in Miss Daryll's dressing-room, while during the day she was constantly seen driving with him in his car or lunching or supping with him at the most expensive places in town.

"Will you come this way, sir?" A trim parlormaid ushered Simon into the room, pausing in the doorway to add: "Miss Daryll is not down yet. I will tell her you are here." Then she vanished, leaving him to take stock of the room in which he found himself. It was very much of the type that he had expected it would be. Plain wallpaper with a frieze of absurd purple camels trekking across a scarlet desert, futurist rugs on a polished floor, while neutral colored chairs and divan served as a background for black cushions splashed with rich-hued embroideries, on one of which sprawled a black and white

pierrot doll, its long legs straggling limply. The piano, chimney-piece, and any other available space appeared crowded with signed photographs of theatrical celebrities, boxes of cigarettes and chocolates, and big bowls of flowers. In the place of honor stood a large new photograph of Colin.

Simon crossed the room to examine it and stood for a few moments regarding it thoughtfully. The boy had altered during the last few months, he thought. The blue eyes had hardened a little. They were more experienced eyes, and the mouth held a shade of recklessness. While he was still staring down at the photograph, the door flew open and Verity entered the room. She was wearing a thick silk Chinese kimono, gayly embroidered in what appeared to Simon to be a combination of cherry blossom and brilliant-hued fireflies. Her hair was loosely knotted in a great bronzy coil at the nape of her neck, and between her fingers she held a cigarette. Apparently she had been interrupted in the process of manicure, for while one hand was tipped with vividly pink nails, those of the other gleamed rather anæmically by contrast. She started as she caught sight of Simon.

"You!" she exclaimed in surprise. "I thought it was Colin. The maid only said 'Mr. Trenby' was here, so of course——"

"Of course. He's such a regular visitor, isn't he?" observed Simon.

"Well—yes, he comes here pretty often." The golden-brown eyes shot sudden defiance at him. "Do you object?"

"Yes," he returned bluntly. "I do. That's why I've come to see you."

Miss Daryll regarded him with a faint, enigmatical smile.

"Well, you're frank, anyway," she said, seating herself on the divan. "Won't you sit down—and have a ciga-

rette? If it's to be a prolonged *séance* we may as well do it comfortably.'

Simon sat down but declined the cigarette, and as though deriding his curt refusal, she herself lit another from the stump of the one she held and delicately puffed a cloud of smoke into the air. Then she humped the cushions more comfortably together at her back and regarded him quizzically from between narrowed lids."

"Well?" she said helpfully.

Simon hesitated.

"First of all," he said at last, "I want to know if it's true that you've promised to marry my brother—to marry Colin?"

She nodded.

"Perfectly true."

"And may I ask why?"

Verity's eyes widened.

"Why? Well, why does one usually promise to marry any one?" she drawled.

"For a variety of reasons. Sometimes for money, sometimes for position, sometimes merely to annoy other people——"

He paused and Verity put in swiftly:

"And sometimes—for love. You've left that out."

"Yes. I've left that out," he answered. "Was I wrong to leave it out?"

Beneath the direct inquiry of his glance she flushed and looked away.

"Was I?" he repeated steadily.

"I don't think I'm called upon to give you my reasons for marrying Colin," she returned. "After all, they only matter to him, don't they?"

"No," he said abruptly. "They don't. They matter to me, because Colin matters to me, more than anything in the world."

"And you don't like actresses, do you?"—mockingly.

"No, I don't."

"You showed me that—quite clearly—when we met down at the Sacheverels." Something, resentment or anger—or was it merely pain?—smoldered darkly in her eyes.

He threw her a quick glance of interrogation.

"And is it because of that—because of that—you are determined to marry Colin?"

"I don't like being snubbed, Mr. Trenby. I'm not used to it." The answer came back like a rapier thrust. "But, do tell me"—with a resumption of her usual nonchalance—"why don't you like actresses? We're quite nice—really."

He was silent a moment. Then:

"Yes. I'll tell you," he said quietly. "I don't like actresses because it was an actress who ruined my father's life. She was Colin's mother, and my father simply worshiped her. And before Colin was a year old she had run away with another man—an actor—and returned to the stage. Not even motherhood"—his voice deepened—"could hold her. It broke my father—I was just old enough to understand it. He was never the same man again, and when he died, five years later, he left Colin—Colin whom his mother had deserted—in my care. And I want to save him from being broken as my father was broken. He's—he's only a kid, and doesn't know yet what—love—means," he added.

"But all actresses don't run away. Lots of them leave the stage when they marry, and become patterns of domestic respectability."

"Once an actress, always an actress. The footlights always call, and you'd go back to them. Because"—quietly—"you're not in love with Colin, and love is the only thing which would make the sacrifice of your career worth while."

"You're quite sure I'm not in love with Colin?"

"Quite. And that's why I've come to you to-day to make you an alternative proposal."

"A proposal?" There was a curiously uneven note in Miss Daryll's voice and a faint shell-pink crept into her cheeks.

"Yes"—composedly. "If you will agree to release my brother from his engagement to you, I propose to settle two thousand a year on you."

The shell-pink vanished suddenly, and in the dead whiteness of the face she turned towards him her eyes gleamed like frosty stars.

"So"—she said slowly. "You think I'm to be bought! You're offering to—to buy me off?"

"You put it very crudely," he returned.

"It was a crude offer."

"It was a reasonable offer. Marriage with a man of Colin's means has other sides to it than"—cruelly—"the merely romantic one. You're a woman of the world—nearly seven years older than Colin—and I was speaking to you as such. Need we wrap up the real significance of this interview?"

Verity jabbed the end of her cigarette down on the black Wedgwood ash-tray and extinguished its glowing tip.

"And I suppose," she said in a high, rather strained tone of voice, "it hasn't occurred to you that Colin may have no desire to be 'released,' as you call it?"

"Certainly it has. But it would be up to you to deal with that side of the matter—to cure Colin of his infatuation. That would be your part of the bargain."

She sprang to her feet with a swift, fierce movement of supple limbs.

"Which I flatly decline to carry out! You can keep your two thousand a year, Mr. Trenby, and I"—her eyes flared defiance at him—"will keep Colin."

Mechanically he had risen to his feet when she did, and

now he stood looking down at her, conscious of an odd surprise and bewilderment. He had been so sure that the money would tempt her, but, in the face of her flat refusal of his offer, he was beginning to wonder if he had utterly misjudged her. With his ingrained prejudice and hostility to all her kind he had assumed that Colin meant no more to her than a financially satisfactory settlement in life. And now—now he was asking himself if, after all, she *really* cared for Colin?

He remembered his first meeting with her. They had both arrived by the same train at a little wayside station in Devonshire, and shared the same car, sent to meet the expected guests, on the fifteen-mile run from the station to Sacheverel Park. At the time he had no idea of his fellow-traveler's identity, and there had been something about her—a frankness in the golden-brown eyes, a certain simplicity underlying all the sophistication evident in the finished detail of her toilette and her careful “make-up”—which had attracted him. Afterwards, when his hostess had formerly presented him and he learned that his companion of the journey was the leading lady at the Cosmopolitan Theater, he had experienced a violent reaction, and throughout his brief visit he had deliberately avoided Miss Daryll whenever politely possible and, when it was not, opposed a chill indifference to her friendliness. Then, later, a storm across the Yorkshire moors had brought her to the threshold of his own door, and his distrust of her type of woman had leaped into new life, to be justified by the way in which she had immediately, and apparently without effort, annexed his brother and attached him to her chariot wheels.

But if she really cared for Colin, so much so that she was actually prepared to renounce the stage in order to marry him, then he had misjudged her terribly, and, at the thought, he was conscious of an odd conflict of emotion. The thing affected him with a strange poignancy—

at one stroke it both gave him back the woman he had first met and known and took her from him irrevocably.

"You don't seem to understand." Her voice had hardened and now drove harshly across the current of his thoughts. "You don't seem to understand that marriage with Colin is a much better proposition for a woman like me than a mere two thousand a year—without marriage."

A wave of swift revulsion swept over him. He had been right, then! He had not misjudged her at all. She was as coolly calculating, as predatory in her instincts as any other woman of the adventuress type—capable of assessing Colin's value as a matrimonial proposition to the last farthing. And beneath the grim satisfaction he felt at the correctness of his earlier estimate of her, beneath the fury of contempt her frank self-seeking awakened in him, he was aware of a curious sense of disappointment.

"So," he said, and the scorn in his voice cut like a sharp blade. "So it's marriage you want—marriage and money combined. Nothing less will satisfy you?"

Unable to meet his eyes, she shook her head mutely. A bitter silence fell between them, bleak and biting as the iron-gray silence of an ice-bound winter night. At last, after what seemed an interminable length of time, he broke it.

"Then—marry me."

"Marry—you?" She repeated the words after him doubtfully, as though uncertain if she had heard him aright.

"Yes. Well?" as she still hesitated. "What do you say to it?"

"But, why? I don't understand. Why should you ask me to marry you when you've just been doing all you can to prevent my marrying Colin?"

"That's why. I don't want you to marry Colin. He's got all his life before him, and—I want him to be happy."

"And you think that would be impossible—with me?"

"I do. That is why I'm offering you the alternative of marrying me. I'm the elder. From the point of view of this world's goods I'm better off than Colin—much more worth your powder and shot, if you only knew it."

She winced at the brutal frankness of the speech, but recovered herself swiftly.

"I can't say I care for your method of making love," she said, and her long brown-gold eyes challenged him mockingly.

His own kindled, seeming to catch fire from hers, and he made a sudden impulsive step towards her.

"Don't you?" he said unevenly. "Shall I try—another way?"

For a moment a queer, breathless silence held them both. The atmosphere was suddenly electric, charged with an emotional tensivity which gripped both the man and woman. Verity's hand went involuntarily to her breast. Her lips moved, but no words came. Then, as though some live wire had snapped between them, Simon gave a short laugh and drew back.

"You should have all the money you want," he went on in the same cool tones as before. It was as if that suddenly tense moment had never been; a door, ajar for an instant, had closed again between them. "And all the freedom. I don't care a damn how you treat me—but leave Colin alone. Well, is it a deal? Will you marry me?"

Verity's foot tapped restlessly on the ground. Her head was downbent so that he could not see her face. At last, however, she looked up, her expression enigmatic.

"Yes," she said. "I'll marry you."

"And you'll——" He paused, then finished with a faint smile: "You'll—disenchant Colin?"

She regarded him a little sadly.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," she said, "that the mere facts of the case will disenchant him fast enough? After

to-day, he will think of me—just what you think. And with more reason. He is”—her voice trembled the least little bit—“very like you in some ways.”

Colin took it badly. There were only two things clear to his blazing young indignation. At one and the same moment his brother and the woman with whom he imagined himself in love had let him down. The scene betwixt him and Verity in the gay little room, with its purple camels and multi-colored cushions and floppy, straggly-legged pierrot, was short and bitter.

“Simon was right about you, then,” he flung at her. “I jeered at him and called him ‘Simon Pure,’ but, by God, he knew your kind of woman better than I do. He’s welcome to you”—savagely. “And I hope he’s pleased with his bargain.”

Verity caught her breath. She wished she could tell him that he was misjudging his brother horribly. For herself, it didn’t much matter what Colin thought. Nothing mattered.

“You don’t understand, Colin,” she said. “You—you couldn’t. But—some day——”

“No, I certainly don’t understand.” The boyish voice was raw-edged with a fierce contempt that hurt right down somewhere in the depths of him. “And I hope to heaven I never shall!”

He marched out of the room without looking back at her once, and for quite a fortnight the world was compact of dust and ashes and Colin a confirmed misogynist. After that, seeing that it was his boy’s pride that had been hurt rather than any more vital part of his spiritual anatomy, convalescence set in.

Verity’s charming brows drew together as she pored over the letter she had just received. It was headed “*Little Croft*” and written in Simon’s decided, clear-cut hand, and, boiled down to its residuum of fact, it conveyed the news that he had lost practically his entire for-

tune in the big bank failure which had recently surprised the whole financial world.

"I am now a comparatively poor man," he wrote, "and, that being so, I can no longer presume to hold you to your bargain to marry me. You are free—free to marry Colin if you wish. Probably you think this is a poor sort of gift I am giving you—merely the husk and not the kernel. But the freedom I give you back is a real freedom. I could not give you less than I took from you, and as soon as it is humanly possible, I will see Colin and tell him that I, and I alone, am to blame for your refusal to marry him. His share of our mutual inheritance, by the way, is quite intact, having been more fortunately invested than my own."

The wording of the letter was curiously stiff and formal, so formal, indeed, that Verity smiled a little to herself. It made her think of a small boy who has tumbled down and cut his knees but proudly assures every one in rather unsteady tones that "it doesn't hurt a bit, thank you."

The letter produced two immediate results. It procured Miss Daryll's understudy the chance she had been waiting for during many fruitless months, and sent Miss Daryll herself to the other end of England as fast as the midnight train could thunder its way northwards.

It was early in the morning—to be accurate, at precisely nine a.m.—that a rather uncertain tapping on the window-pane distracted Simon's attention from his matutinal eggs and bacon. For, even though banks may fail, eggs and bacon still command an Englishman's attention at nine o'clock in the morning.

The tapping carried his thoughts vividly back to a certain storm-ridden night three months—or was it three centuries?—ago, and he frowned irritably.

"Oh, damn!" he muttered, because it isn't nice to find that your nerves are playing tricks with you, and Simon had found this two or three times during the course of the last few days.

Then the tapping came again, sounding too definitely on this occasion to be accounted for by jumpy nerves. He looked across at the window and saw her standing there, and before he knew what he was doing he had leaped up, thrown the window wide, and lifted her clean over the low sill into the room beside him.

"Verity! Verity!"

Then he remembered, and his arms fell to his sides.

"What are you doing here?" he asked dully.

"It's my place to be here. It's any woman's place to be with the man she's going to marry when he's in trouble."

He nodded.

"Yes. It would be—if we were going to be married and if we were ordinary man and woman."

"I'm quite an ordinary woman," she said. "You've never believed it, but actresses are—awfully like other women, Simon dear." She smiled—a queer little tremulous smile. "They're ready to stand by their men just as other women do."

"I don't think you've understood. I'm a poor man now, Verity. Little Croft is all that is left to me."

She looked round the old raftered room with eyes that were very soft.

"I'm glad they've left you Little Croft," she said simply. "Two people who—who loved could be very happy here."

"Verity——" His hands gripped her shoulders, forcing her to face him. "Verity, what do you mean? 'Two people—who loved'? You wanted to marry Colin."

"Yes." Her head drooped. "Because—just because he was so like you, Simon. He reminded me of you in a

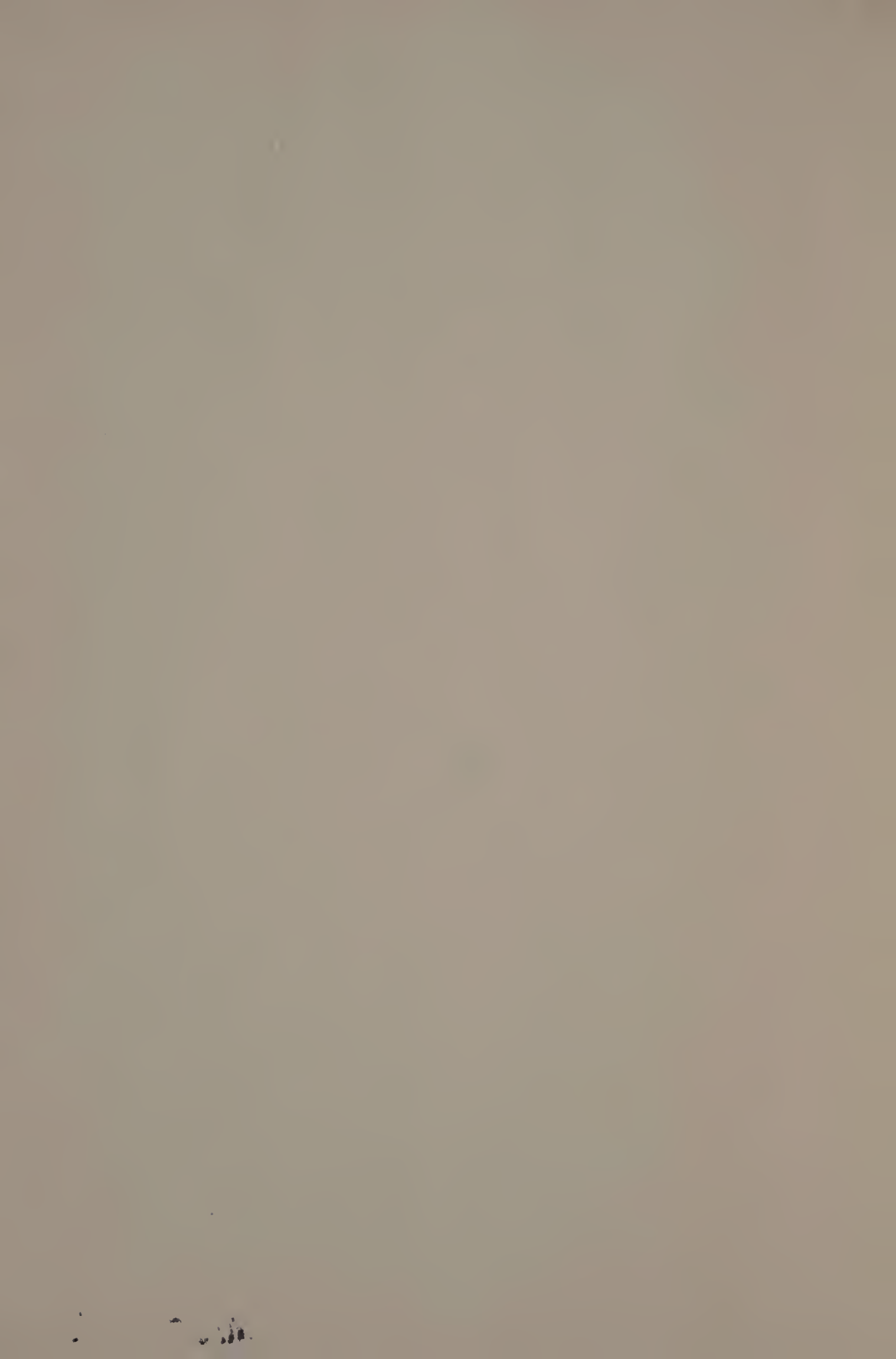
dozen different ways—it was almost your voice that spoke, sometimes—your laugh. And I thought you would never care for me. You hated actresses so much. For you we were all tarred with the same brush—heartless, just squeezing all we could out of life, like Colin's mother. Oh, it wasn't fair, Simon—you can't judge people like that. You see, I cared from the very beginning, when we first met at Sacheverel Park, and I had a feeling that you might have cared, too—only you wouldn't let yourself——”

“No,” he said. “I wouldn't let myself.”

“And afterwards—afterwards”—with a hint of tender mockery—“you were so busy taking care of Colin that you forgot all about yourself. Even when finally you *did* ask me to marry you—to save Colin—you still distrusted me completely, and you were so horribly rich that there was no way of proving to you that I loved—just you. But now——” She broke off and came quite close to him. “Simon, dear,” she said, “do you think you could ever learn to love me—and trust me, too?”

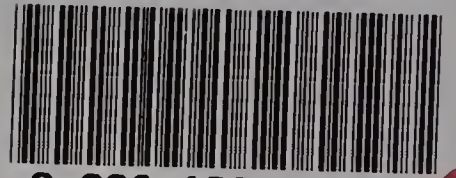
With that the last barrier went down, and he caught her up in his arms.

“I think,” he said, “it would be the very easiest thing in the world.”



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